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Democrats Press For Halt in Secret Nicaragua Actions

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Amid sharply rising concern about the situation in Central America, a closely divided House was asked by Democratic leaders yesterday to order a halt to supposedly secret CIA paramilitary operations in Nicaragua.

Five hours of unusually intense and public debate included Democratic charges that the covert CIA operations are illegal and dangerous, and Republican appeals not to "pull the rug" from President Reagan and U.S. friends in the region.

The debate provided only the barest clues, though, to the political balance in the House, which is scheduled to vote today on whether to terminate the U.S.-backed "secret war" against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

Republicans and Democrats on both sides of Capitol Hill registered unhappiness to senior administration officials, including Secretary of State George P. Shultz and national security affairs adviser William P. Clark, at the lack of consultation with Congress about large-scale military maneuvers in the region ordered by Reagan, according to congressional sources.

Their unhappiness on this point may be heightened by an official disclosure by the Navy that its maneuvers off the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of Nicaragua will involve 19 ships—including two aircraft carriers and a battleship—140 warplanes and 16,500 officers and men. An additional 3,000 to 4,000 U.S. military personnel are to be on the ground in Honduras while the flotillas are off-shore.

A senior Pentagon official said the planned exercises are so large that the Defense Department may have to ask Congress for more money, possibly through a reallocation of funds, to pay the cost. The official would not say how much the exercise will cost.

As some U.S. warships began maneuvers 100 miles off the Pacific coast of Central America, Pentagon officials disclosed that about six cargo ships from the Soviet Union and other eastern European nations are steaming toward Nicaragua with helicopters and other military hardware aboard. The officials said this is an unusually large number of supply ships at any one time.

The ships are expected in the Nicaraguan port of Corinto within the

next week and are led by the Soviet ship Aleksandr Ulyanov, which Reagan mentioned during his news conference Tuesday night. They are carrying howitzers, rockets, trucks and electronic gear in addition to helicopters, Pentagon officials said.

The political struggle in Washington was focused on the House debate over terminating covert CIA aid to the anti-government guerrillas in Nicaragua and replacing it with \$80 million in open or overt help to friendly governments to impede the flow of illicit arms to the region.

Reagan said Tuesday night that cutting off the covert aid would be a "very grave mistake" and could create "a giant headache down the road."

Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, a sponsor of the cutoff measure, led the long-awaited

public debate on the House floor by charging that "this secret war is bad U.S. policy—because it doesn't work, because it is in fact counterproductive to U.S. interests, because it is illegal."

Boland cast his opposition partly in terms of congressional responsibility for actions related to war and peace, and declared that his bill "represents the most serious stage of disagreement" by the Intelligence Committee with the executive branch since the creation six years ago of the secretive and usually bipartisan House unit.

Boland said the avowed purposes as well as the scale of the "secret war" had changed completely since they were first brought to his committee as a small-scale operation in December, 1981.

House Majority Leader James C. Wright Jr. (D-Tex.) said that in the CIA operation "we financed an invasion from outside of a sovereign country," an action that he said caused growing apprehension and protest by friendly nations in Latin America. Rep. J. Kenneth Robinson (Va.), senior Republican on the Intelligence panel, led the counterattack, charging that the issue has been politicized and that a cutoff would bring "a 180-degree change in policy" that would seriously affect U.S. standing and interests in Central America and elsewhere.

Robinson said the covert war had been pursued legally and with congressional consent. To give it up now would relieve increasingly successful pressure on Nicaragua to change its ways, he said, and "cause many governments in the area to feel that because of the Nicaraguan/Cuban military superiority, they must try to 'cut their own deal,' so to speak, with Nicaragua or fear reprisals."

Rep. G. William Whitehurst (R-Va.), also a member of the Intelligence panel, charged